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The Quilt Revisited

by Christopher Hewitt

What's in a name? If you talk to the folks at the Names Project, they'll tell you "a helluva lot." They initiated the first AIDS Memorial Quilt in 1987, commemorating the deaths, or rather the lives of PWAs who had died at that time of the disease. Since then, thousands more panels have been added of course as thousands more have died and the pandemic has spread worldwide. The Quilt is now sadly (and wonderfully) international and in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, a portion of the International AIDS Memorial Quilt was on show in the Esplanade Garden at Yerba Buena Gardens in San Francisco, June 23-25. I had previously only seen a portion of the American Quilt when it was on tour in Albany, New York, three years ago. I found this experience deeply moving because every now and then, in fact more often than I expected, I recognized the names of acquaintances and even one or two close friends. Eight years ago, five of my closest friends dies of the disease. I was so devastated that it was all I could do to hold myself together enough to go to work, let alone sew panels in their honor for the Quilt. I have written eulogies and read them at my friends' funerals and memorial services. I avoided making any panels also by making the excuse to myself that I was a **writer** and not an **embroidery queen!** (setting aside the fact that the folks at the Names Project will help you design and show you how to make a panel). Two of my friends I know are remembered in the Quilt – other friends of my friends, more conscientious than I, did the work though I searched in vain for those panels at Yerba Buena. What was there was a smattering of panels from many countries. It brought home to me the enormity of the pandemic and how many people's lives have been ended,

devastated, and touched in one way or another all over the world. We the viewing public were invited to read over a microphone lists of names of the PWAs remembered in the Quilt. You could chose whatever country you liked. This presented me with a dilemma; although I grew up in England, I've lived in the States for twenty-one years. Should I read from the American or the UK list? At first, I chose the American list. Not seeing any of my friends' names on the list, I decided on the UK list instead. I figured I could at least pronounce their names **correctly** with my nice, solid, middle-class English accent (how chauvinistic of me, I thought later!). Then I chided myself. I realized this whole thing wasn't just about me and my dead friends. It was about people who had died from all over, and I wasn't there just for myself but to honor them. I still read the UK list but pronounced the names in my regular mid-Atlantic accent.

On the list were "The Unknown Women" and "Paul the Dog." The former has the poignant anonymity of "The Unknown Soldier." Was "Paul the Dog" an S/M queen, I wondered? The folks at the desk from the Names Project invited us readers to add names of our friends if we wished. This is when I almost lost it. As I stood there with the microphone in my hand looking out over the expanse of grass covered with brightly colored panels, I could only remember the names of three of my five friends who had died. After I had shakily said the names I put down the microphone, wandered in a confused, an almost drunk-like state, back to my apartment in the Tenderloin. In my mind's eye, I saw my friends in flashes – alive and well, having dinner and coffee with me in restaurants on Manhattan's Upper West Side or at the Café Flore in San Francisco and then lying sick and emaciated in their hospital beds and attached to life support systems. The triumph and the blessing of the Quilt is that it represents in visual terms attempts by the loved

ones to bring the names of their dead to life. So touching are the fragments of the PWAs' belongings attached or sewn into the panels: the red high heels and pink boa of a drag queen, a piece of embroidery by a mother, the teddy bear belonging to a six year old, the favorite prayer of a priest's son. These things especially tug at one's heart strings.

So, what's in a name? Everything for those familiar with its owner, glimpses for those unfamiliar. But many glimpses make up a life, and many panels make up a quilt. By the way, I've started my first panel. Maybe I will become an embroidery queen after all!

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